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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [OSCE](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: A/S FRIED DELIVERS TOUGH MESSAGE ON MEDIA FREEDOM
TO AZERBAIJANI AMBASSADOR TO THE U.S.

REF: REF BAKU 1359

Classified By: EUR A/S DANIEL FRIED PER REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) European and Eurasian Affairs Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried delivered a strong message on November 21 in Washington to Azerbaijani Ambassador Yashar Aliyev on the state of media freedom in Azerbaijan. Fried reviewed his November 3-5 meetings in Baku, including a lengthy session with President Aliyev, multiple fora with civil society and a frank (if friendly) exchange with powerful Chief of Staff Ramiz Mekhtiyev. The Assistant Secretary reiterated the core points he shared in Baku: that while the President has thus far skillfully advanced and protected Azerbaijan's sovereignty, Azerbaijan's development of democratic institutions is lagging - especially in view of the 'tsunami' of oil wealth now entering its coffers; and the unending series of arrests and detention of journalists serves no purpose, and could only undermine Aliyev's attempts to build a modern state.

12. (C) A/S Fried raised the latest detention by the GoAJ of opposition paper Azadliq's editor, Ganimat Zahid, on the charge of hooliganism. He echoed incredulously, "hooliganism? Is this Moscow in 1979?" Fried pressed further, "Does this sound plausible? Is this the publicity you want coming out of your country?" Fried acknowledged the President resented international criticism that painted him as a dictator. Continued arrests of opposition journalists, however, "weakens him and limits his strategic choices". Ambassador Aliyev, listening intently, agreed to convey the Assistant Secretary's points to Foreign Minister Mammadyarov. He described the decision-makers in the GoAJ as "sitting in a can" in Baku, with comfortable lives - unaware of the destructive nature of international perception. If the media crackdown continues apace, Fried emphasized that internationally respected NGOs (e.g., Human Rights Watch) will be harshly critical, as will the USG.

13. (C) A/S Fried urged Ambassador Aliyev to convey the importance of a free and fair presidential election in October 2008. By inviting a robust team of OSCE/ODHIR election observers, President Aliyev can definitively distinguish himself from Putin and autocrats such as Karimov. Even without mentioning the Russian decisions that had made impossible ODIHR's mission to the parliamentary elections there, Aliyev would send a strong message that "he is not afraid" of honest elections, Fried pressed. Ambassador Aliyev quickly agreed that President Aliyev has sufficient support to win an election and that the GoAJ "must do our best". Fried stressed it mattered to world opinion "what kind of winner" emerged from the election.

14. (C) The Assistant Secretary reasoned that many of the young, professional and patriotic Azerbaijanis he met in Baku could provide a political base for Aliyev. Professionals, entrepreneurs and youth are natural supporters of a strong

leader who serves as a guardian of stability and rule of law.

He said he had urged Chief of Staff Mekhtiyev to "grow your electorate". Yet these reform-minded progressive individuals confessed they face intimidation and feel fearful of engaging politically, given the current political climate. A/S Fried bluntly stated his grave concern about the potential for a dangerous cycle, with repression leading to alienation and possible radicalization.

15. (C) While sincerely thanking the Ambassador for the courtesies the GoAJ had extended him in Baku, Fried cautioned that his friendliness was not to be interpreted as a license to disregard his democracy message. Fried highlighted recent USG statements about the imposition of the state of emergency in Georgia, noting our statements were extremely critical and that the U.S. does not give President Saakashvili or any friend a free pass.

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